

What is Salvation?

And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..."

Acts 16:29 – 31¹

The theme of salvation is dominant throughout Scripture. J.I. Packer notes that salvation is "The master theme of the Christian Gospel..."² People's need for salvation, the idea of being rescued or delivered from Satan, sin, death, and judgment, is seen from the very opening chapters of The Bible (Gen 1 – 3). The question the Philippian Jailer asks Paul & Silas, as referenced above, is truly the question of every single human being; the need for salvation is clear throughout the story of Scripture.

But Scripture also has a lot to teach us about the nature of Salvation. God, in His grace, does not leave us destitute in our need and in our understanding of Salvation. Instead, He generously reveals to us the truth of salvation throughout Scripture. Thus, when we ask the question, "What is Salvation?" the issue is not scarcity, but abundance. In fact, we could write volumes on the nature of salvation, and many have masterfully done just that.³ Also, there are many subtopics that arise when discussing the doctrine of salvation and while we will touch on several, it is not the nature of this paper to dive deeply into each one. Instead, our goal is to understand what it is we believe concerning salvation. To achieve this we will first look at what we are saved from, what God has done to save us, and how one comes to experience this salvation.

Saved from What?

If we understand salvation to be a rescue or deliverance, which is what Scripture means when it uses this term⁴, the natural question is, "Than what are we saved from?" The short answer is, we are saved from sin and its consequences. While humans were originally created to experience harmony and peace with God and His creation, their direct disobedience brought death into the world (Gen 3, Romans 5) and broke their relationship with their Creator. Cornelius Plantinga helps us understand the nature of sin when he writes, "Sin is disruption of created harmony and then the resistance to divine restoration of that harmony." & "Sin is a culpable and personal affront to a personal God."⁵

Sin caused men and women to be alienated and separated from God and one another. It brought them under the wrath and judgment of a holy God, who in His pure & just nature cannot leave sin unpunished, nor reside in its presence. It also cut them off from the source of life, thus resulting in the ultimate consequence of sin... physical and spiritual death (Gen. 3:17). This decision, not only affected Adam and Eve, but as Adam is the federal head of humanity, it also caused the Fall of all people. All of us are born into a state of sin and there is not one of us who is righteous before God. In order for us to understand the nature of salvation, it is helpful for us to take a moment and understand the nature of the state of sin in which humanity finds itself.

Radical Depravity

Because of Adam's sin, all of humanity is born into a state of sin (Romans 5:18). From the moment of birth, we are

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from English Standard Version® (ESV®)
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² J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1993) 146.

³ See almost any solid Evangelical Systematic Theology, eg. J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*; Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*;

⁴ Hebrew = יָשָׁא (yasa') - deliverance, rescue, salvation; Greek = σωζῶ (soōzō) - to save, rescue; to preserve safe and unharmed

⁵ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 5, 13

not born as innocent creatures, but instead are born depraved.⁶ Lest we think that we are absolved of responsibility, we also perpetuate this state by our sinful acts. This state of sin and alienation from God, theologians have often referred to as radical, or total, depravity. Radical depravity is not the idea that we are as bad or depraved as we could be; that is, that humans always act in the worst possible way. But, it is the understanding that we, because of our birth into a state of sin, are unable to do anything to save ourselves from the consequences of sin. Further, our sin blinds us and keeps us from even truly looking for salvation from God. Two passages help us to understand this idea of radical depravity.

For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

Romans 3:9 - 12

Here Paul, in quoting from Psalm 14 & 53, helps us to understand that not one person is righteous before God; all are in a state of sin, and worse they are not even seeking God. Our state of sinfulness not only separates us from God, it keeps us from even seeking Him and the salvation he offers. Paul puts it like this in his letter to the Ephesians.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived

in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Ephesians 2:1 – 3

Again, Paul gives us a description of the state of humanity prior to salvation. He describes us as dead and because of our deadness in sin we are children of wrath. God's righteous judgment stands against us for our sin. Paul's description of deadness is key here, as it helps us to see that in our state prior to salvation, there was not any spiritual life or vitality in us. To describe someone as physically dead is to describe them without any life in them. Paul here is describing us as spiritually dead, acknowledging that sin has left us without any spiritual life and because we are dead we are completely unable to save ourselves.

So this is what humankind is in need of saving from, sin and its consequences. Because of the disobedience of our forefather Adam, and because of our own disobedience, we are in a state of sin. In this state of sin we stand as slaves to sin's destruction of both God's good creation and ourselves. We also stand in judgment and condemnation under a holy God for our unholy sinfulness. Further, we are in a state of spiritual death, where by we are unable to save ourselves or even seek after the salvation that God offers. It is only as we understand what we are being saved from, and the utter desperate state of sinfulness that we are in, that we are then able to appreciate that magnitude of God's act of salvation.

Saved by God

How then can people be saved? If we are unable to achieve any form of salvation for ourselves, and we aren't even looking for the salvation God offers, how can anyone be rescued from this state of sin? The good news is that salvation is not a human concept, but it originates as a gift from God himself. The apostle Paul explains it this way...

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our

⁶ This is commonly referred to as the Doctrine of Original Sin

trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:4 – 9

Our Reformation forefathers, based on this passage and others, unequivocally proclaimed that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It is, as we understand these truths that we see how great a salvation God has accomplished for us.

By Grace Alone

In Ephesians 2, Paul makes clear for us that salvation is a gift of God's grace. Salvation originates with God; He is the source and accomplisher of it (Heb 5:9, Titus 3:5, Jonah 2:9, Romans 8:28-30). When it comes to our salvation as Christ followers, we understand that we do not contribute anything to our salvation, but that God, through His abundant grace, saves us. He gifts salvation to us, and not only does He gift us salvation, He also gifts us everything necessary for our salvation (Romans 8:28 – 30). Some argue against this understanding. They contend that people contribute something to their salvation, even if it is merely faith. But, as one understands the Biblical teaching of the depravity of humanity we see that people are completely unable to even obtain the faith necessary for salvation because of their sinful state. The idea that humans partner with God in their salvation is historically known as synergism, 'Syn' – meaning together and 'ergon' meaning work. Thus, humans and God work together in their salvation. This stands opposite of monergism, 'mono' meaning alone, which is the understanding that God works alone in the accomplishment of salvation. Scripture affirms over and over again that Salvation is an act of God's grace, and it is a work that He does for His people by both electing and saving them (Ephesians 1:4 – 5, Romans 9:16, Romans 8:28 – 30). Even the above Ephesians passage makes this evident as the phrase "And this is not your own" refers back to both faith and salvation in its entirety. Therefore, to understand that salvation is by Grace alone is to understand that Salvation is monergistic. God has saved us by His grace and we have done nothing to warrant nor to aid in this work of salvation. It is merely a gift of love from Him to His people.

In Christ Alone⁷

God then by His grace alone accomplishes our salvation through His Son Jesus alone. We are saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...

1 Corinthians 15:1 - 3

Paul again makes it clear that we are saved through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is why the mantra of Protestantism is that we are saved In Christ Alone. But how does Christ save us? Not through worldly power or wisdom, but through his perfect life, his death on the cross, and His resurrection from the grave. The Scriptures uses many different images and ideas to help us understand Christ's saving work on our behalf. For the sake of this paper, we will look briefly at several key ideas.

Substitutionary Atonement

As we stated previously, our sin brought with it the just judgment and wrath of God. God cannot leave sin and

7

disobedience unpunished or He would not be supremely just. Thus, we stood condemned for our sin. But Jesus took the punishment and the wrath of God for our sin and in doing so atoned (that is, made amends) for our sin. He was our substitute and received our punishment so that God would be both just and justifier (Romans 3:26) and we would be free from the penalty of sin and stand justified before God. Further, Christ gifted us His righteousness so that we are not seen in our sin, but in His perfect righteousness. Scripture uses the terms propitiation and expiation to describe this salvific act where by in propitiation Jesus appeases God's wrath, and in expiation He removes the guilt of our sin, all through His death. The believer, by Christ's atonement, stands justified and righteous before a Holy God. Several Passages affirm these truths of Christ's substitutionary atonement...

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
2 Corinthians 5:21

And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.
1 Peter 2:24

And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins...
1 John 2:1 – 2

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit...
1 Peter 3:18

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.
Romans 5:8-10

Redemption

Christ not only atones for the penalty of our sin, He also redeems us from sin and its consequences, especially death. By redeeming us, Christ has paid our ransom and rescued us not only from the curse of sin, but also the power of sin in our lives, and accomplished for us our future resurrection and glorification. As a liberator redeems a slave from a slave-owner, so Christ has redeemed us from our slavery to sin and its consequences.

And not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.
Hebrews 9:12

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.
Mark 10:45

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 6:23

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace...
Ephesians 1:7

Christus Victor

Christ not only saves us from the power and penalty of sin, but also from the power of God's enemy, satan. Through His death Christ has defeated satan power over the believer so that we, along with Christ, will achieve ultimate victory over the enemies of God.

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

1 John 3:8

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Colossians 2:13 - 15

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

Hebrews 2:14-15

Reconciliation

Finally, Jesus not only saves us from sin and its consequences, rescues us from death, and saves us from our enemy satan, but He also saves us for something. He saves us that we might be reconciled to God. Though sin broke our relationship with God, through Christ, our relationship with God is reconciled and restored.

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Romans 5:10-11

and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

Ephesians 2:16

While there are other aspects of Christ's work of salvation, the above realities help us to see that salvation is truly accomplished in Christ alone. He, by His life, death and resurrection, saves us from satan, sin and its consequences, death, and the wrath/judgment of God.

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

Acts 4:12

By Faith Alone

Finally, the last article of the truth of how we are saved is by faith alone. The notion by faith alone affirms that salvation is applied to our lives through our faith. Salvation is not accomplished by our work or by anything we do. We do not earn salvation; we simply receive it as a gift. The way that we receive salvation is through the gift of faith.

For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

Romans 4:3

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

Romans 4:16

It is when we believe in Christ and in His work on our behalf that we are saved.

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

Romans 10:9 – 10

It is through faith in Christ that we experience salvation from God. But even faith is a gift, which God graciously gives to us. He is the one who awakens our dead hearts, gives us the gift of faith so that we might experience His salvation. Thus, all of salvation is a work of God and as Christ-followers we stand in awe of His work on our behalf to save us. It is, as we understand what God has saved us from, and how God has saved us, by grace through faith in Christ, that we are filled with gratitude and worship for a God who would so graciously love sinners such as us.

How Can One Be Saved?

If you have read this and are still wondering how you might be saved. Scripture makes it quite clear. Harken back to Paul’s instruction to the Philippian Jailer at the beginning of this paper. “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” We are saved through believing in Jesus Christ. Here is a simple way to take the step of believing in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

